

Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung)

{mow' tsay-tung'}

Mao Zedong founded the People's Republic of China in 1949. He had also been one of the founders of the Chinese Communist party in 1921, and he is regarded, along with Karl MARX and V. I. LENIN, as one of the three great theorists of Marxian communism.

Early Life

Mao Zedong was born on Dec. 26, 1893, into a well-to-do peasant family in Shaoshan (Shao-shan), Hunan province. As a child he worked in the fields and attended a local primary school, where he studied the traditional Confucian classics. He was frequently in conflict with his strict father, whom Mao learned successfully to confront—with the support of his gentle and devoutly Buddhist mother. Beginning in 1911, the year that the republican forces of SUN YAT-SEN launched the overthrow of the Qing (Ch'ing or Manchu) dynasty, Mao spent most of 10 years in the provincial capital. He was exposed to the tides of rapid political change and the new culture movement then sweeping the country. He served briefly in the republican army and then spent half a year studying alone in the provincial library—an experience that confirmed him in the habit of independent study.

By 1918, Mao had graduated from the Hunan First Normal School and had gone to Beijing (Peking), the national capital, where he worked briefly as a library assistant at Beijing University. Mao lacked the funds to support a regular student status and, unlike many of his classmates, mastered no foreign language and did not study abroad. It may be partly due to his relative poverty during his student years that he never identified completely with the cosmopolitan bourgeois intellectuals who dominated Chinese university life. He did establish contact with intellectual radicals who later figured prominently in the Chinese Communist party. In 1919, Mao returned to Hunan, where he engaged in radical political activity, while supporting himself as a primary-school principal.

In 1920, Mao married Yang Kaihui (Yang K'ai-hui), the daughter of one of his teachers. Yang Kaihui was executed by the Chinese Nationalists in 1930. In that year Mao married He Zizhen (Ho Tzu-chen), who accompanied him on the Long March. Mao divorced her (1937), and in 1939 he married JIANG QING (Chiang Ch'ing).

When the Chinese Communist party (CCP) was organized in Shanghai in 1921, Mao was a founding member and leader of the Hunan branch. At this stage the new party formed a united front with the KUOMINTANG, the party of the republican followers of Sun Yat-sen. Mao worked within the united front in Shanghai, Hunan, and Guangzhou (Canton), concentrating variously on labor organization, party organization, propaganda, and the Peasant Movement Training Institute. His 1927 "Report on the Peasant Movement in Hunan" expressed his view of the revolutionary potential of the peasantry.

Conflict with the Nationalists

In 1927, CHIANG KAI-SHEK, who had gained control of the Kuomintang after the death of Sun Yat-sen, reversed that party's policy of cooperation with the Communists. By the next year, when he had control of the Nationalist armies as well as the Nationalist government, Chiang purged all Communists from the movement. Mao was forced to flee to the mountains of south China, where he established with ZHU DE (Chu Teh) a rural base defended by a guerrilla army. It was this almost accidental fusion of Communist leadership with a guerrilla force operating in rural areas with peasant support that was to make Mao the leader of the CCP. Because of their growing military power, Mao and Zhu were able by 1930 to defy orders of the Russian-controlled CCP leadership that directed them to try to capture cities.

In the following year, despite the fact that his position in the party was weak and his policies were criticized, a Chinese soviet was founded in Jiangsu (Kiangsi) province, with Mao as chairman. A series of extermination campaigns by Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government forced the CCP to abandon Ruijin in October 1934 and to commence the LONG MARCH. At Zunyi (Tsun-i) in Guizhou (Kweichow), Mao for the first time gained effective control over the CCP, ending the era of Russian direction of party leadership. Remnants of the Communist forces reached Shaanxi (Shensi) in October 1935, after a march of 10,000 km (6,000 mi). They then established a new party headquarters at Yenan.

When the Japanese invasion of 1937 forced the CCP and the Kuomintang once again to form a united front, the Communists gained legitimacy as defenders of the Chinese homeland, and Mao rose in stature as a national leader. During this period he established himself as a military theorist and, through the publication in 1937 of such

essays as "On Contradiction" and "On Practice," laid claim to recognition as an important Marxist thinker. Mao's essay "On New Democracy" (1940) outlined a unique national form of Marxism appropriate to China; his "Talks at the Yen'an Forum on Literature and Art" (1942) provided a basis for party control over cultural affairs.

China's Leader

The soundness of Mao's self-reliance and rural guerrilla strategies was proved by the CCP's rapid growth during the Yen'an period—from 40,000 members in 1937 to 1,200,000 members in 1945. The shaky truce between the Communists and Nationalists was broken at the end of the war. Efforts were made—by the United States, in particular—to forge a coalition government. Civil war erupted, however, and the following years (1946–49) saw the rapid defeat of the Kuomintang. Chiang's government was forced to flee to Taiwan, leaving the People's Republic of China, formed by the Communists in late 1949, in control of the entire Chinese mainland.

When Mao's efforts to open relations with the United States in the late 1940s were rebuffed, he concluded that China would have to "lean to one side," and a period of close alliance with the USSR followed. Mao's fear that a U. S. victory in Korea would threaten China contributed to China's entry into the Korean War. During the early 1950s, Mao served as chairman of the Communist party, chief of state, and chairman of the military commission. His international status as a Marxist leader rose after the death of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in 1953.

Mao's uniqueness as a leader is evident from his commitment to continued class struggle under socialism—a view confirmed in his theoretical treatise "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People" (1957). Dissatisfaction with the slowness of development, the loss of revolutionary momentum in the countryside, and the tendency for CCP members to behave like a privileged class led Mao to take a number of unusual initiatives in the late 1950s. In the Hundred Flowers movement of 1956–57 he encouraged intellectuals to make constructive criticism of the party's stewardship. When the criticism came, it revealed deep hostility to CCP leadership. At about the same time, Mao accelerated the transformation of rural ownership by calling for the elimination of the last vestiges of rural private property and the formation of people's communes, and for the initiation of rapid industrial growth through a program known as the GREAT LEAP FORWARD. The suddenness of these moves led to administrative confusion and popular resistance. Furthermore, adverse weather conditions resulted in disastrous crop shortfalls and severe food shortages. All these reverses cost Mao his position as chief of state, and his influence over the party was severely curtailed. It was also during the late 1950s that Mao's government began to reveal its deep-seated differences with the USSR.

During the 1960s, Mao made a comeback, attacking the party leadership and the new chief of state, LIU SHAOQI (Liu Shao-Ch'i), through a Great Proletarian CULTURAL REVOLUTION, which peaked from 1966 to 1969. The Cultural Revolution was largely orchestrated by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing. It was perhaps Mao's greatest innovation and was essentially an ideological struggle for public opinion carried out in the form of a frantic national debate. Mao proved to be a master tactician. When he could not get his ideas across in the Beijing press, he used the Shanghai press to attack the Beijing leadership. Students, mobilized as "Red Guards," became his most avid supporters. As tensions mounted and events threatened to get out of hand, Mao was obliged to rely increasingly on the military, under the leadership of LIN BIAO (Lin Piao). In return for this military support, the party named Lin as Mao's successor in its 1969 constitution. By 1971, however, Lin was reported to have died in a plane crash after having plotted to assassinate Mao, and Mao was once more firmly in control.

On the popular level the thrust of the Cultural Revolution was to teach the Chinese masses that it was "right to revolt"—that it was their privilege to criticize those in positions of authority and to take an active part in decision making. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao's sayings, printed in a little red book, and buttons bearing his image were distributed to the masses; his word was treated as an ultimate authority, and his person the subject of ecstatic adulation. Despite this temporary assumption of an authority higher than the CCP, Mao continued to state his belief in the Leninist notion of collective party leadership. He showed his opposition to the "personality cult" by explicitly asking that the number of statues of him be reduced.

Toward the end of his life, Mao put forward a new analysis of the international situation in which the world's states were divided into three groups: the underdeveloped nations, the developed nations, and the two superpowers (the United States and the USSR), both of which sought worldwide hegemony. This analysis underscored China's position as a leader of the Third World (i.e., the underdeveloped group) and helped to rationalize a rapprochement with the United States. The fostering of closer relations with the United States was looked upon as a way to lessen the influence of the USSR, whose relations with China had continued to deteriorate. In 1972, Mao lent his prestige to this policy change by receiving U.S. president Richard M. NIXON in Beijing.

Mao died in Beijing on Sept. 9, 1976. The following month Jiang Qing and her radical associates, known as the GANG OF FOUR, were arrested. Mao's chosen successor, HUA GUOFENG (Hua Kuo-feng), was stripped of his influential posts as the party came under the control of moderates led by DENG XIAOPING (Teng Hsiao-P'ing). In 1981 the party criticized the excesses of the Cultural Revolution while praising Mao for his leadership in earlier years. The Constitution of 1982 stated that economic cooperation and progress were more important than class struggle and banned all forms of personality cults.

During the early and late 1980s, a general movement away from Mao's beliefs was noted, and his statue was removed from a number of sites throughout China. In February 1989, a member of the Central Advisory Commission to the Communist party wrote in an official Peking newspaper, the Guangming Daily, that "Mao was a great man who embodied the calamities of the Chinese people, but in his later years he made big mistakes over a long period, and the result was great disaster for the people and the country. He created a historical tragedy."

Evaluation

Along with the founders of the Han and Ming dynasties, Mao Zedong was one of only three peasants who rose to rule all of China in a single lifetime. Mao's greatest achievements were the unification of China through the destruction of Nationalist power, the creation of a unified People's Republic, and the leadership of the greatest social revolution in human history. This revolution involved collectivization of most land and property, the destruction of the landlord class, the weakening of the urban bourgeoisie, and the elevation of the status of peasants and industrial workers. As a Marxist thinker and the leader of a socialist state, Mao gave theoretical legitimacy to the continuation of class struggle in the socialist and communist stages of development. Although Mao was criticized after his death for the failure of his economic policies and the revolutionary excesses of his later years, his basic foreign policy was continued and his theories, particularly those on the revolutionary potential of the peasantry, remained influential in the nonindustrialized Third World.

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